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A QUARTER-CENTURY OF
RUSSIAN WOMEN'S FICTION**

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"Da, zhenskaya dusha dolzhna v teni svetit'sya."

[Yes, a woman's soul should shine in the dark.]

—Yevdokiya Rostopchina

("Kak dolzhny pisat' zhenshchiny," 1840)

"Ya nauchila zhenshchin govorit'..."

[I taught women how to speak.]

—Anna Akhmatova (1960)

Taxonomy and Gender

Experience has taught Slavists to expect the unexpected from Russia. They therefore greet with equanimity the glaring contradiction between the premises underlying ostensible publication patterns, on the one hand, and the invalidation of those premises in critical responses to the published materials, on the other. The case of women's literature exemplifies the paradox. A Westerner might reasonably attribute to heightened gender consciousness the recent reissue of Russian works by such long-ignored individuals as Karolina Pavlova,

Yevdokiya Rostopchina, and Mariya Zhukova, in tandem with almost a dozen collections of women's fiction.¹ Yet Russian reviewers continue to assert vehemently that literature possesses no gender. In the same breath, however, they lambast the (non-existent) category of women's literature ("zhenskaya literatura") for its mediocrity according to criteria that await definition.²

Although the bias is immemorial, the illogicality is relatively new in Russian culture and motivated by historical developments. During the early decades of the preceding century the now controversial but then largely unexamined categories of "women's literature" and "woman's talent" were invoked unproblematically—e.g., in reviews of Yevdokiya Rostopchina's published poems throughout the 1830s.³ Symptomatic of the times is her admirer Pyotr Vyazemskiy's letter to Aleksandr Turgenev, which caps an enthusiastic paean to her lyric "Posledniy tsvetok" (The Last Flower) with the somewhat enigmatic exclamation "skol'ko zhenskogo!" (how much of the womanly [there is

1 For example, the three-volume set entitled *Dacha na Petergofskoy dorozhe* (1986), *Svidaniye* (1987), and *Tol'ko chas* (1988); *Zhenskaya logika* (1989), *Chisten'kaya zhizn'* (1990), *Ne pomnyashchaya zla* (1990), *Serditsa chutkogo prazren'eniya* (1991), *Novyye Amazonki* (1991), and *Abstinentski* (1991).

2 For samples of Russian criticism along these lines and a discussion of the peculiarities that characterize this brand of pseudo-reasoning, see *Skirted Issues: The Discreteness and Indiscretions of Russian Women's Prose*, ed. Helena Goscilo (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, Spring 1992) vol. 28, 2.

3 During the 1830s Rostopchina's poetry met with enthusiastic encomium from Pushkin, Zhukovskiy, Polevoy, Bulgarin, Grech, and others. References to the womanly cast of her verses may be found in Belinskiy, Shev'yev, and Sergey Ernst, plus at least half a dozen reviewers.



in it!]).⁴ What exactly constituted "womanliness" may be inferred from the correspondence of the period and the then popular genre of the society tale, with its embryonic feminist impulse.⁵ These illuminate the degree to which early nineteenth-century Russian society embraced the gendered binarism that Hélène Cixous outlines in "Sorties." In this essentialist polarization, which equates the masculine (normative, ideal) with activity, culture, light, intellect, and Logos, woman, as the deviant (lesser, Other) becomes synonymous with passivity, nature, darkness or reflected light, emotion, and Pathos.⁶ Indeed, Rostopchina's own programmatic verses, cited above, with their "feminine" images of veils, marble, and moon, valorize modesty, suppression, mystery, propriety, dreaminess, and tears *qua* supplementary discourse as the desiderata of specifically women's poetic (self-)expression.⁷ Biology, rigid social customs, and the conditions of everyday life during this period seemed to reinforce the "identity by antithesis" that separated woman from men in both private and public spheres.⁸ And such influential publications as Otto Weininger's misogynistic *Sex and Character* (Pol i kharakter), which enjoyed extraordinary popularity in the 1900s, further promoted this discreteness as a "logical" corollary of inherent gender distinctions. Few skeptics challenged the essentialist binary paradigm formalizing differences purportedly legitimated by Nature.

A convergence of historical developments at the turn of the century, however, urged a radical reassessment of woman's role in society, and, consequently, of her "nature." These included rapid modernization, with its industrial boom and technological advances; the accession to power of the Soviets, with their agenda of enforced uniformity; and a rapid succession of wars, which compelled Russian women to undertake traditionally male functions, in addition to their own. As women joined the labor force, fought in battle, and sup-

ported families singlehandedly, the inculcated image of woman as a decorative vessel of emotion, a fragile repository of tender ideals, became increasingly difficult to sustain. Faced with the dilemma of strong, resilient women capable of shouldering the double burden of professional and domestic responsibilities, Russian society persisted in conflating femaleness with gentle femininity, even though empirical circumstances called upon women, who far outnumbered the war-decimated male population, to be resourceful, aggressive, physically tough, and decisive.⁹ It is hardly startling, then, that in the cultural arena the familiar phrases "women's literature" and "woman writer" acquired pejorative or at best ambiguous connotations that were intuitively grasped by everyone, if unarticulated. Anna Akhmatova, who claimed to have taught women poets to speak in their own voice, nonetheless vigorously repudiated the rubric "woman poet" (*poetessa*). Female authors instinctively disavowed such labels, correctly construing them as dismissive, thinly coded signals for inferiority within their culture.

The patent incongruity between the drastic transformations in women's activities in the Soviet Union, on the one hand, and the country's retrograde adherence to immemorial gender stereotypes, on the other, renders the woman writer a paradoxical creature. Although Soviet society proselytizes sexual distinctions in all other walks of life, it makes a unique exception for literature. Writers themselves, while participating in the entrenched habit of touting women's inherent "femininity," simultaneously discount the relevance of gender to creative processes. According to their untenable scenario, the instant a woman starts to write, she miraculously jettisons the "inherent" feminine traits that she unavoidably displays elsewhere. This willful exclusion of gender from artistic creation in the face of its reinforcement everywhere else may be explained by the Soviets' sense of what

4 See the recent volume of selections from Rostopchina's poetry, prose, and correspondence: E. P. Rostopchina, *Talisman* (M. 1987), p. 6. Viktor Astaf'ev notes, "Many critics singled out precisely the feminine nature of Rostopchina's poetry and expressed the desire that she not forsake that route. But she never even considered repudiating the feminine quality of her verses, and striving to become a Poet instead of a Poetess [sic]." To corroborate this judgment, he cites from her poem "Chernovaya kniga Pushkina" (Pushkin's Draft Notebook): "ya zhenshchina!.. vo mne i mysl' i vdokhnoven'e / Smirennoy skromnost'yu byt' skovany dolzhny" (9).

5 On the feminist element in society tales, see Helena Goscilo, "The First Pechorin En Route to A Hero," *Russian Literature* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 129-62.

6 Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1986), pp. 63-64.

7 For the entire text of the poem see Rostopchina, p. 74.

8 Exceptions to this rule included those who joined the women's liberation movement. See Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978).

9 For the gradual formation (largely via superimposition) of gender roles in Soviet society, see Lynne Atwood, *The New Soviet Man and Woman: Sex-Role Socialization in the USSR* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990) and Mary Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union* (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1989).

constitutes "women's literature." Comments by three of the most successful contemporary women prosaists—Lyudmila Petrushevskaya, Viktoriya Tokareva, and Tat'yana Tolstaya—, as well as by the prolific, influential critic Natal'ya Ivanova, betray the irrationality of this disjunctive reasoning. While denying the validity and usefulness of a gendered literary category, on the one hand, they do not hesitate, on the other, to characterize it in purely derogatory terms as superficial, trivial, decorative, excessively descriptive, philistine in outlook, saccharine in tone, and overly preoccupied with romance.¹⁰ Yet Tolstaya's revelatory statement that men also produce "women's prose" leaves unanswered the crucial question why hack work of this sort merits a gendered label.¹¹ The assertion of all four that there is actually only good and bad prose, irrespective of gender, makes clear that the negative epithet, for reasons anchored in the gender disposition of Russian society, is interchangeable with "women's." In short, female authors dissociate themselves from "women's" writing chiefly because the ostensibly innocent term does duty for evaluative modifiers.

Contemporary Women's Fiction

Given the sizable corpus of Russian women's fiction published during the last quarter-century, a thorough survey would warrant a book-length study,¹² particularly because existent histories of Soviet literature in Russia and the West regularly ignore women's writings. Setting aside the volatile issue of literary quality, even a cursory overview would require discussion, minimally, of four generations of women, separated, to an extent, by key events in Russia's history: those born (1) before the Bolshevik Revolution: I. Grekova (b. 1907) and Natal'ya Baranskaya (b. 1908); (2) between the two world wars: Irina Velebovskaya (1922-90), Inna Varlamova (1922-90), Maiya Ganina (b. 1927), Natal'ya Sukhanova (b. 1931), Galina Shcherbakova (b. 1932), Nina Katerli (b. 1934), Viktoriya Tokareva (b.

1937) Lyudmila Petrushevskaya (b. 1938), and Bella Ulanovskaya (b. 1943); (3) in the post-World War II period: Tat'yana Nabatnikova (b. 1948), Nadezhda Kozhevnikova (b. 1949), Nina Sadur (b. 1950) Tat'yana Tolstaya (b. 1951), Yelena Makarova (b. 1951), Dina Rubina (b. 1953), and Larisa Vaneyeva (b. 1953); and (4) in the post-Stalin era: Marina Paley (b. 1955), Svetlana Vasilenko (b. 1956) and Valeriya Narbikova (b. 1960). Such demarcations, of course, inevitably smack of arbitrariness, particularly since the correlation between age and professional debut varies enormously; some individuals (e.g., Dina Rubina) began writing in their early youth, whereas others embarked on a literary career only at retirement age (e.g., Baranskaya and Grekova, at 55 and 50 respectively). Still others encountered resistance from censorship, which occasioned extraordinary delays in their access to print (e.g., Petrushevskaya, who waited approximately two decades before having her stories from the 1960s accepted). Finally, one could make a persuasive argument for expanding the proposed roster to encompass Lyudmila Uvarova, Vera Panova, Natal'ya Il'ina, Lyubov' Yunina, Larisa Fyodorova, Irina Raksha, Alla Kalinina, Anna Mass, Inna Goff, Nina Gorlanova, Valentina Sidorenko, Lyudmila Ulitskaya, Irina Polyanskaya, and dozens more. Considerations of space and structure, rather than the subjective preferences that invariably govern any selection, oblige me to exclude the majority, so as to concentrate on only a handful of the above-named writers.

Despite the reductive consequences of any generalization, which applies falsely universalizing measures and downplays those individual aspects on which any concept of authorship depends, it is possible to isolate certain typical features of contemporary women's prose. The single most distinctive common denominator, which generates a series of corollary commonalities, is, unsurprisingly, an intense focus on women's experience and psychology. Women of all ages, social backgrounds, professions, and temperaments not only hold center stage in women's fiction, but most frequently also provide the prism through which

10 See Sigrid McLaughlin, "Contemporary Soviet Women Writers," *Canadian Woman Studies* 10, no. 4 (Winter 1989): 77; Sigrid McLaughlin, "An Interview with Viktoriya Tokareva," *Canadian Woman Studies* 10, no. 4 (Winter 1989): 75; Tatyana Tolstaya, "A Little Man Is a Normal Man," *Moscow News* 8 (1987): 10; Natal'ya Ivanova, "Kogda by zhizn' domashnim krugom . . .," *Literaturnaya gazeta* 4 (1986): 72-74.

11 Tolstaya, "A Little Man . . ." p. 10. For an examination of women's self-perception during Gorbachev's tenure, see Helena Goscilo, "Perestroika or Domostroika?: The Construction of Womanhood in Culture under Glasnost," *Late Soviet Culture*, ed. Thomas Lahusen (Durham: Duke UP, 1991).

12 The choice of 1965 as the year marking the birth of contemporary women's fiction not only suffers from the kind of oversimplification that attaches to all cut-off dates but also is an approximation at best. It was dictated partially by the death of Anna Akhmatova in 1966, whose disappearance from Russian literature seemed to end an entire era, and by the official or unacknowledged debut of those women authors whose names became synonymous with women's prose today: Baranskaya, Grekova, Ganina.

events are refracted. In feminist parlance, Russian women's fiction is gynocentric. Women's search for self-actualization (usually played out in the context of a modern urban environment) spawns many of the recurrent themes in this literature: love, marriage, familial relations, single parenting, abortion, maternity, infidelity, divorce, conflicting pressures of home and career, and generational antagonism. Through these personal (and highly personalized) concerns, such perennial human preoccupations as integrity, materialism, compromise, self-delusion, loneliness, and so forth come under analysis, as does a wide range of social problems: male alcoholism, widespread institutional corruption, disaffection of youth, men's involvement in multiple "marriages," parental irresponsibility, and lack of adequate living space, products, and medical care. Stylistic hallmarks of women's fiction, which favors the short story and *povest'* (novella) over the novel, include a subordination of plot to a preponderance of description; an exploration of levels and modes of consciousness; a style that eschews modernist techniques; and a stable perspective conveyed through quasi-direct discourse—a limited (most frequently female) viewpoint in which boundaries between author, narrator, and protagonist often dissolve.¹³

To counter the anticipated objection that such an account applies equally to contemporary male fiction, one need only appreciate how substantially a portrayal of women from within—with its nuanced tracing of mental and psychological processes—differs from a mainly external depiction. In addition, the direct, focal treatment of political issues and the immanent impulse to universalize that mark male narratives are largely alien to women's writing, just as vividly particularized insights into the anguished atmosphere of a maternity ward or an abortion clinic rarely, if ever, find their way into male prose.¹⁴ Moreover, since many real-life husbands and fathers hold aloof from household and parental duties, domestic and familial obligations

in the Soviet Union became almost exclusively women's realm. When reflected or refracted in literature, that situation yields correspondingly different emphases. Because women's disproportionately more numerous responsibilities entail intimate familiarity with kindergartens, schools, clinics, hospitals, stores, teachers, children, nurses and doctors, pensioners, etc., it stands to reason that these figure much more prominently in works by authors with firsthand knowledge of them (the correlation is especially notable in "*literatura byta*" ["literature of everyday life"]).¹⁵ Furthermore, while both sexes essentialize through ascribing irrationality, emotionalism, love of domesticity, and inordinate absorption with clothes and physical appearance to "the gentle sex" (supposedly destined for maternity and self-sacrifice), women tend to problematize these hackneyed formulations, which malestream fiction (above all, the village prose contingent) takes for granted and therefore relegates to the invisible status of natural givens and immutable truths sedimented in the nation's psyche.

If women's fiction contrasts in thought-provoking ways with men's, it also demonstrates shifts and permutations within the corpus along a chronological continuum. Under the impact of changing socio-political, psychological, and artistic conditions, that fiction has evolved over the last quarter-century, gradually moving away from an adoption of the gender paradigms imposed by official orthodoxy (internalized in the work of the older generation), through ambivalent revisionism (among the middle generations), to relative autonomy (of the younger generation). While few writers seem to grasp the politics of gender formation, whereby institutionalized ideology propagates an essentialist "norm" of womanhood in order to consolidate its own political or economic power,¹⁶ the coercive exemplar of "femininity" has perceptibly weakened its hold over women's self-conceptualization within the last decade.¹⁷ Nowadays female authors

- 13 For a thumbnail sketch of current Russian women's fiction, see the Introduction to Helena Goscilo, *Balancing Acts* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989) xiii-xxvii; Sigrid McLaughlin, "Contemporary Soviet Women Writers," *Canadian Woman Studies* 10, no. 4: 77-82. For a more thorough analysis, see Nicholas G. Zekulin, "Soviet Russian Women's Literature in the Early 1980s," *Fruits of her Plume: Essays on Contemporary Russian Women's Culture*, ed. H. Goscilo (NY: M.E. Sharpe, forthcoming).
- 14 For female authors' exploration of the hospital ward as productive chronotope, see Helena Goscilo, "Women's Wards and Wardens: The Hospital in Contemporary Russian Women's Fiction," *Canadian Woman Studies* 10, no. 4: 83-86.
- 15 Soviet critics have chastised women's (and the late Yuriy Trifonov's) prose for wallowing in *byt*—a strange rebuke in light of Russians' enduring devotion to the mimetic school of fiction. On this, see Zekulin.
- 16 See Atwood and Buckley.
- 17 Soviets have drawn the blueprint for womanhood in impossibly heroic proportions that synthesize at least four discrete, often conflicting, identities: the reliable, industrious worker; the loving, supportive wife; the nurturing mother-homemaker; the attractive, stylish woman (whose sexuality, if it exists, is unobtrusive and sublimated via one or more of the other three functions).

ironize or impugn gender stereotypes, adduce alternatives to sanctioned models, or write as though the latter did not exist. My essay examines fiction authored by four generations of women writers in light of this gradual dissociation from essentialist binarism.

Orthodoxy with a Woman's Face: The Older Generation

The oeuvre of Natal'ya Baranskaya and I. Grekova, the undisputed doyennes of contemporary Russian women's fiction, testifies to the inseparability of the particular historical moment from the psychological development of a writer. Born within a year of each other, widowed by war, and drawn into literature after sustained careers in other professions, both underwent hardships during the country's successive upheavals that indelibly stamped their psyche and, by extension, their prose. That prose instantly identifies them as members of a generation bound by a sense of personal accountability, an admiration for and commitment to ideals, and an awareness of the apparently limitless reserves of human fortitude and self-sacrifice, notably on the part of women. In short, the pluperfect of a vanished historical era informs the moral standards of their fictional present. Their gynocentric prose focuses above all on ethical problems,¹⁸ dramatized through pivotal decisions and behavior in Grekova's case (from "Na ispytaniakh" [On Maneuvers, 1967] to "Bez ulybok" [No Smiles, 1986]), and in Baranskaya's, through the less visible medium of perception and judgment. For example, Grekova's novella *Kafedra* (The Department, 1978), with its dizzyingly tangled web of heterosexual relationships, grapples with professional and personal integrity in scientific research, the story "Letom v gorode" (One Summer in the City, 1965), with the moral choice of abortion. Baranskaya's more

understated narratives caution against prejudice, simplistic readings, and impatient conclusions in our assessment of others (e.g., "Zhenshchina s zontikom" [Woman with an Umbrella], "Vorovka" [The Thief], "Partnery" [Partners]). Curiously, both writers seem to share their female protagonists' optimistic faith in the power of love, even though the specific romantic pursuits, liaisons, and marriages proliferating in their fiction emphasize the pain and humiliation of love relationships, which ultimately end in failure. The lyric haze of personal desire patently beclouds the clarity of dispassionate authorial observation. This general affirmation in the teeth of circumstantiated misery and gloom allies Baranskaya and Grekova with socialist realism and the optimism it mandates, no matter how grim the circumstances. And this brand of optimism is license to conceive women as impermeable.¹⁹ Indeed, the conservative strain that surfaces in their female characters' obligatory cheerfulness, self-denial, and reconciliation to the status quo also accounts for the cult of maternity that resides at the core of their fiction and coincides with official campaigns for increasing the country's labor force. That ideological tendency is exemplified in Natalya Sukhanova's pro-natalist text "Delos," which invokes myth to mythologize motherhood. Furthermore, Baranskaya's, Grekova's (and also Sukhanova's) lackluster style, whereby the prose occasionally slides into an anemic, generic flatness that verges on journalese, by default foregrounds the thematic content of their works, consolidating their value more as social documents than as artistically crafted texts.²⁰

Baranskaya's reputation as a specifically female author will ultimately rest on the two narratives that frame her career: *Nedelya kak nedelya* (A Week Like any Other, 1969) and *Den' pominoveniya* (Memorial Day, 1989).²¹ Its status as the first piece of fiction to chronicle women's way of life in the USSR

18 Grekova, who disclaims the concept of women's literature, nevertheless firmly believes in "the special emotional and nervous structure of a woman's personality, in her enslavement to problems of love, marriage and the family." She goes on to claim: "Complete equality between men and women is hardly possible. And [...] more importantly, is it desirable? There is not and cannot be equality in physiology, in the emotional sphere or in the raising of children." Interview with Nikolai Nazarov, "About I. Grekova's Work," *Soviet Literature* 5 (1986): 140-41.

19 On this phenomenon, see Gillian Beer, "Representing Women: Re-presenting the Past," *The Feminist Reader*, eds. Catherine Belsey & Jane Moore (NY: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 75.

20 On the stylistic limitations of Baranskaya, see David Gillespie, "Whore or Madonna: Perceptions of Women in Modern Russian Literature," *Irish Slavonic Studies* 9 (1988): 96-97; of Grekova, see Nancy Condee, "Irina Grekova," *Institute of Current World Affairs Newsletter* 10 (1 September 1985): 9.

21 For a commonsensical survey of Baranskaya's stories, see Susan Kay, "A Woman's Work," *Irish Slavonic Studies* 8 (1987): 115-26. For a comparative assessment of Baranskaya's two longest works, see Thomas Lahusen, "'Leaving Paradise' and Perestroika: A Week Like Any Other and Memorial Day by Natal'ia Baranskaia," *Fruits of her Plume*. No less sympathetic to women's lot in the 1830s than to their plight in the modern era, Baranskaya in her fictional memoir *Tsvet temnogo medu* (The Color of Dark Honey, 1977), defends Pushkin's wife Natalya Goncharova from charges of self-promotion and frivolity by stressing her youth, modesty, shyness, insecurity, and repeated pregnancies. See the interview with Pieta Monks in *Writing Lives*, ed. Mary Chamberlain (London: Virago Press, 1988), pp. 25-36.

virtually guaranteed *Nedelya kak nedelya* the sensation it caused in Russia and abroad. The steady accumulation of data through the first-person narration of Ol'ga Voronkova, a technical research assistant at an institute laboratory, coheres into a poignant account of the educated Russian woman's insoluble dilemma: how to manage the relentless barrage of duties that attach to her multiple roles of loving wife, nurturing mother, conscientious housekeeper, and full-time skilled employee. This "mission impossible" transforms Ol'ga into Alice in Wonderland, desperately racing so as to stay in the same place. Baranskaya's skillful handling of time and space as Ol'ga's twin enemies conveys the unbearable pressure under which she struggles to meet superhuman demands, while harboring guilt for her quite understandable failure to do so.

Nedelya kak nedelya established a model for subsequent forays in depicting—from within—the plight of women laboring under the burden of Soviet icons of womanhood. The avalanche of mail provoked by the story evidenced that in Soviet eyes Baranskaya admirably fulfilled her stated intention to portray the hardships of women's lives.²² Abroad, Baranskaya exceeded that intention, insofar as the West interpreted *Nedelya kak nedelya* as a feminist protest against male oppression exercised on a personal as well as social level. The divergence in reception suggests how fundamentally socio-political forces affect reading strategies. What impressed Western readers, initiated into the debates on gender, as an unambiguously feminist text was conceived by its decidedly unfeminist author as a story affirming the triumph of love! After all, Ol'ga's spouse Dima is "a wonderful husband," Baranskaya insists (echoing Ol'ga's co-worker Dark Lyusya), for he "still" loves her after five years of marriage, helps her with the children, and neither drinks nor commits adultery.²³ This defense of Dima illustrates the startlingly minimal expectations the majority of Russian women have of men, by contrast with what their society has trained them to exact from themselves. In fact, *Nedelya kak nedelya* embraces the gendered myths premised on the conviction that Nature, through biological differences, scripted dissimilar lives for men and women, entrusting them with functions and responsibilities

determined by their contrasting physical (hence character) traits. Those absolutes buttress the cult of motherhood (Dima "helps Ol'ga" with the children, as if they were not equally his, and Ol'ga alone misses work repeatedly on account of the children's various ailments, even though her professional qualifications parallel Dima's); the identification of women with domesticity (both Ol'ga and Dima view cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing, and sewing as her domain, which prevents her from reading the technical materials that Dima has time to enjoy); and the coercive yoking of love to women's self-abnegation (significantly, all of the women at work "cannot but admire [seventy-year-old Mariya Matveyevna] for her life of sacrifice"). Here, as elsewhere, Baranskaya glorifies love as the primary motivation for her female protagonist's basic accommodation to both the imbalanced division of domestic labor and, more comprehensively, the treadmill that comprises her hectic, frustrated existence. Although the narrative broaches the issue of gender inequity through Ol'ga's case, as well as through her female co-workers' thwarted biographies, it ultimately shies away from drawing conclusions that would rock the boat of Soviet misogyny. Baranskaya's reluctance to pursue such problems beyond a certain point stems not from any compelling narrative short-circuiting, but from the inconsistency in her own thinking, grounded in an internalized sexism that confuses femaleness with femininity.²⁴

Den' pominoveniya, the novel Baranskaya considers the culmination of her literary career, confirms in less mediated fashion the values implicit in *Nedelya kak nedelya*. A memorial to her husband, who perished in 1943, this highly retrospective autobiographical work follows seven women's journey on the twenty-fifth anniversary of World War II to the graves of their husbands and sons, all killed in the war. Despite the diversity of the women's backgrounds, education, and temperaments, their ruminations and reminiscences intersect on several major gender-related points: women live not as independent beings, but primarily through men and above all through children, who constitute the *raison d'être* of existence; intrinsically different from men, women are more religious, instinctual, and in

22 Monks, p. 30.

23 During an interview with me in 1988 Baranskaya waxed indignant over Western feminists' appropriation of *Nedelya kak nedelya*. Her dismay that the English translation had been brought out by a publisher called Virago duplicates Grekova's irritated sense that her *Vdoviy parokhod* (Ship of Widows) was distorted by the mere fact that its English version appeared in a feminist press. On this, see Condee, p. 8; Goscilo, "Domostroika."

24 See Toril Moi, "Feminist, Female, Feminine," *The Feminist Reader*, pp. 117-32.

closer communion with nature; women's preordained mission (apotheosized in motherhood) is that of nurturing, support, stoic acceptance, and self-denial. On a universal scale these largely passive qualities translate into procreation and the promotion of a pacifist ethic through example. It would be perverse to read this somewhat sluggish novel, which lacks the tautness and immediacy of *Nedelya kak nedelya*, along feminist lines, as one conceivably could the earlier narrative. In this, what she frankly calls her first and last large-scale work—a summary of her life's thoughts—Baranskaya practically eliminates the irony and ambiguity that infuse her best short stories, in order to obviate uncertainties about her position on issues she deems crucial. The work exemplifies the concept of women's niche in culture advanced by the Formalist critic Boris Eikhenbaum: to effect the link between generations by preserving and transmitting memory.

Grekova, a renowned mathematician with scholarly publications on the theory of probability under her real name of Yelena Ventsel, is a more prolific prosaist than Baranskaya, and more uneven in quality. Although bold in tackling delicate subjects (the need for scientists to confront the long-range consequences of their research ["*Za prokhnodnoy*" (Beyond the Checkpoint, 1962)], the dismal conditions of Red Army military life ["*Na ispytaniyakh*"], self-seeking opportunism among academics [*Kafedra*], bribery and incompetence in the medical profession ["*Perelom*" (The Break, 1987)]), her proclivity to sentimentalize, schematize characters, and provide somewhat facile solutions undermines her weakest works. While Grekova conveys the intellectual and emotional experiences of her educated, mature female protagonists with verve and sensitivity (e.g., in *Damskiy master* [Ladies' Hairdresser, 1963]), and etches moving, persuasive portraits of female bonding, she nonetheless persists in elevating men as figures of unassailable authority drawn along mythic lines. Women's repeated disappointments and unhappiness at men's hands do not deter them from yearning for "Mr. Right"—who has the irritating habit of materializing in a halo of superhuman attributes at some juncture in the narrative. In *Khozyayka gostinitsy* (The Hotel Manager, 1976), true to the formula of fairy tales, Vera Platonovna (whose name nakedly adverts to her idealism and faith) outlives the military tyrant of a husband who turns her into a willing slave, and sheds the alcoholic live-in lover who discovers a safe berth in her home, to find "true happiness" ("her first real love," Grek-

ova tells us) on her third attempt. Her "prince" of a sea captain sails into her life bathed in an imagery of gold, silver, lofty height, health, and—saddled with a crippled wife, whom he nobly refuses to abandon. Instead, he embarks on a (life-long?) liaison with Vera, moralized by Grekova's relentlessly lyricized domestication of their meetings (presided over by "some ancient god of the family hearth"). In *Kafedra* the smitten widow Lidiya Mikhailovna can conceive of no greater bliss than the security of marriage with the aged professor Zavalishin, a paragon of wisdom and integrity. The supernaturally omniscient "eagle" Dr. Chagin in "*Perelom*" not only restores the middle-aged heroine to health and marries her, but also transforms her values, foresees his own death and her consequent loneliness, and ensures their adoption of an unwanted child to fill that gap. Chagin's mythic proportions make him less a doctor than the ultimate dispenser of infallible prescriptions for life.

According to Grekova, the peak of achievement for women involves the creation of cozy domesticity: catering to men's and children's needs, administering hefty doses of sympathy along with lovingly prepared food, and staying energetic, industrious, and cheerful. Uncontrollable passions and raw sexuality have no place in such a bourgeois environment. As *Khozyayka gostinitsy* illustrates, they represent a temporary stage to be surmounted rather than prolonged, for the ideal woman is neither the hedonist nor the successful professional, but the beaming, dedicated housekeeper. It is no accident that Vera Platonovna actualizes her dream and her natural potential by managing a hotel. A "home" on an extended scale, it provides the perfect venue for showcasing her "feminine talent" of arch-nurturer, just as her surrogate mothering of Vika (her best friend's daughter) allows her to channel her ample maternal instincts. Pangs of remorse trouble any woman in Grekova incapable of building such a "nest" for her family, even an intellectual with an advanced degree and specialized training whose commitment to her job borders on the fanatical (Kira Petrovna, the therapist in "*Perelom*").

Grekova's most memorable work is the novella that brought her back into the public spotlight in the Soviet Union, sparked impassioned debates, and was adapted for the stage: *Vdoviy parokhod* (The Ship of Widows, 1981). A close-up of five widows in a Moscow communal apartment during and immediately following World War II, this microcosm of Soviet society comprises a world, primarily of women, struggling to cope with the degradations,

losses, and invisible wounds inflicted on survivors both by the war and the mechanisms holding the country in place. The five, representing different social strata, consist of the religious peasant Kapa; Ol'ga Flerova, a former concert pianist, and Ada, a retired operetta singer, who belongs to the intelligentsia; the proletarian Panka, and the working woman Anfisa, with whose funeral the novella opens. The retrospective narrative, which emanates largely from Ol'ga's viewpoint but intermittently yields to an omniscient narrative voice, traces the birth, adolescence, and early adulthood of Anfisa's illegitimate son Vadim. His development into a callous, self-absorbed egotist interweaves with the affecting group portrayal of intolerable human suffering, both mitigated and exacerbated by the relationships that arise solely from people's enforced cohabitation in a limited space.

Vdoviy parokhod is a woman's version of *Crime and Punishment* that dramatizes inconclusively the conundrum frequently posed in the former Soviet Union: what accounts for the self-seeking superciliousness and indifference of post-war children born to a generation noted for its communal spirit and self-sacrifice? While wisely withholding final or even tentative answers to that query, Grekova nonetheless mounts several of her favorite hobby horses regarding gender distinctions, love, and the sanctity of motherhood. Women meekly acquiesce not only to men's intemperate drinking and violence (although Anfisa's husband Fyodor drinks and beats her, he is "like her child," just as the soldiers fighting at the front "need comforting like babies"), but also to their dictating of terms (because her alcoholic husband does not want children, Panka has three abortions and when her unofficial second husband tires of her, he leaves without a word; Kapa contracts two loveless marriages for her family's sake, is widowed each time, and takes a married lover, who also later abandons her). "Love," we learn, "is a rare talent," possessed, it seems, primarily, if not exclusively, by women, who, with their "women's tears" and eagerness to please, "suffocate" men (claimed by Fyodor and Vadim about Anfisa). Grekova resorts to the sado-masochistic vocabulary of enslavement to define Anfisa's relations with Vadim and, by implication, two of the three men in her life: "Anfisa fed her son.

She overflowed into him, her master. No one had ever mastered her like this, neither Fyodor nor Grigory. No one but Vadim." The lexicon echoes Anfisa's, who believes that "a man's his own master" (whereas woman, presumably, is not her own mistress). Ada refers to her "weak feminine character" and declares that "stoutness doesn't hurt a man, it's women who have to watch their figure"; Ol'ga wonders whether inside her lives "a woman begging for charity" and pays Vadim the ultimate compliment on his nursing/housekeeping abilities by feminizing them ("it looked as though a woman's hands had made [...Anfisa's] bed"). When repeated by diverse characters, these solidify into a chorus of code-confirming sentiments to which Grekova herself subscribes.²⁵

Country Matters and Reassessment

Although more than a decade younger, the late Irina Velembovskaya and Inna Varlamova began writing at an earlier age, so their literary debut roughly coincided with Baranskaya's and Grekova's. Whereas most female authors opt for urban locales, both Velembovskaya and Varlamova set a number of their works from the 1960s and 1970s in the rural or peripheral regions of the USSR (the countryside in Velembovskaya's "Dela semeynye" [Family Matters, 1966] and a village in her "V trudnyu minutu" [Through Hard Times, 1965], a Ukrainian kolkhoz in Varlamova's "Troie" [Three-some, 1968] and Western Siberia in her "Kovshik dlya chistoy vody" [A Ladle for Pure Water, 1969]). They have the vision and subtlety not to dismiss uneducated and even somewhat stupid women from their spectrum of female protagonists, and the skill to endow them with psychological complexity despite their rudimentary intellect (e.g., Panya in "V trudnyu minutu," Anya in *Sladkaya zhenshchina* [A Sweet Woman, 1973], and Khatanzeyeva in "Kovshik"). Instead of schematizing along gender lines that produce predictable heroines and villains, they treat strengths and weaknesses in both sexes evenhandedly and do not fetishize maternity. Unlike their unusually prolific contemporary Lyudmila Uvarova, Velembovskaya and Varlamova wrote comparatively little, that small output showing their flair for reproducing regional dialects in a

25 A reader conversant with Western feminism and sharp-edged prosaists like Fay Weldon and Margaret Atwood receives mixed messages from the softened-and-blurred gynocentrism of Baranskaya and Grekova, with its essentialist notions of maternity, femininity, etc., and its addiction to powerful male figures.

prose that is somewhat old-fashioned, straightforward, and, regrettably, often anonymous in style.

The gynocentrism of Velembovskaya's fiction is attested by her declarative titles: *Zhenshchiny* (Women, 1964), *Sladkaya zhenshchina*—both adapted into films—, and *Marisha Ogon'kova*. In her most popular and best work, ironically called *Sladkaya zhenshchina*, Velembovskaya creates a rounded portrait of a vain pragmatist whose machinations alienate her husband and lover, leading finally to middle-aged solitude relieved only by the undeserved compassion of the son she neglected and never loved. Devoid of sentimentalism and unflinchingly consistent in its exfoliation of Anya's psychology and its ramifications, Velembovskaya's finely-shaded novella shatters clichés about femininity and frees men from the two-dimensionality of pure Otherness. In creating an unlikable woman without resorting to misogynistic formulae Velembovskaya prepared the ground for such subsequent works as Galina Shcherbakova's "Stena" (The Wall, 1979), Nadezhda Kozhevnikova's "Vera Perova" (1983), and Viktoriya Tokareva's *Pervaya popytka* (Trial Run, 1989).

Varlamova likewise does not absolutize femininity, maternity, or family as sacrosanct entities, though her most ambitious narrative, *Mnimaya zhizn'* (A Counterfeit Life, 1978), intermittently drifts into purple prose during overly lyricized love scenes. For a feminist the autobiographical novel's chief interest lies in its moving, courageous exploration of how women cope with the trauma of mastectomy, an intimate dilemma embedded in the larger context of the intelligentsia's crisis of conscience during the 1960s in Moscow.

Revisionism

The stylistic affinities with journalism of Velembovskaya's and Varlamova's prose likewise mark Galina Shcherbakova's and Maiya Ganina's fiction. Whereas Shcherbakova's novella *Vam i ne snilos'* (You Never Dreamed of It) focuses on noble impulses in the young, her predilection in such narratives as "Stena" and "Sluchay s Kuz'menko" (The Kuz'menko Incident) is to show the waning of those impulses with middle age, to expose the almost imperceptible inner corruption of self-deluded ca-

reerists driven by utilitarian motives. Accordingly, in analyzing the dynamics of marriage—tracing the disillusionments, betrayals, and grievances that accrue over the years—she rhetoricizes its disintegration as a metonymy for social decay. With dispassionate candor she documents how the degrading conditions of Soviet reality, with its mendacity, shoddiness, and bleak deprivation, gradually erode people's sensitivity, kindness, and integrity, fostering pragmatism at the price of humane values.²⁶ Shcherbakova firmly rejects her countrywomen's biologism (which extrapolates an immutable female identity from a set of bodily features),²⁷ and either writes across gendered binarism (e.g., in "Stena" and in the novella signally titled *Anatomiya razvoda* [Anatomy of a Divorce, 1990]), or implicitly invokes it only to ironize its untenability. "Dyadya Khlora i Koryakin" (Uncle Khlora and Koryakin, 1988), for instance, mocks a number of stereotypes through its tongue-in-cheek account of the fight over rights to a little girl by two misogynistic middle-aged men (the natural father and her stepfather) to whose lives she unexpectedly brings meaning. The conflict is resolved through their living together as an unlikely threesome, the two fathers in the reconstituted family exhibiting all the emotional attachment, tenderness, and anxiety that gendered clichés impute to maternity alone.

The quest for self-realization by strong, talented women propels Ganina's fiction. Prone to merciless self-analysis and skeptical about others' motives, the typical Ganina protagonist seeks an appropriate outlet for her artistic and, secondarily, her romantic yearnings. Although many Ganina heroines do not fear solitude, and, indeed, prefer it (e.g., "Zapiski neizvestnoy poetessy" [Notes of an Unknown Poetess, 1966], "Zolotoye odinochestvo" [Golden Solitude, 1970]), disappointments in love (affairs peter out, marriages end in divorce) can lend a compensatory dimension to their professional successes. These, in turn, cost dear, painfully attained through discipline, struggle, and impartial self-criticism, they often require forfeiting colleagues' affection. Because in Ganina's moral universe the facile seduction of compromise and reassuring fictions is omnipresent, gifted individuals (e.g., Agrippina in "Teatral'naya aktrisa" [Stage Actress, 1971])²⁸ subject themselves and those

26 In focus and style the fiction of the economist-turned-prosaist Nikolay Shmelyov resembles Shcherbakova's.

27 Soviets reject out of hand the basic notion on which the scholarship of psychoanalytically-inclined feminists like Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein rests: namely, that bodies are culturally as well as physiologically produced. See Beer, pp. 64-65.

around them to constant scrutiny. This tendency to monitor oneself incessantly, to judge everyone according to stringent criteria, and to find them and oneself wanting obtains in both professional and personal spheres. A Freudian in her understanding of psychological drives, Ganina harbors few illusions about human nature, acknowledges the crippling tenacity of early formative experiences, and detects egotism, fear, and pride in ostensibly innocuous and noble actions.

Particularly fearless in this regard is Ganina's novella *Uslysh' svoi chas* (Hear Your Hour Strike, 1975). An achronological first-person account by a middle-aged film actress, Mariya Kovalyova, of representative moments in her biography, it shifts back and forth in time to intertwine several plotlines involving Mariya's knotty interaction with her father, husband, lover, daughter, friends, and former and current co-workers. Through Mariya's educated, weak-willed old father Ganina ruthlessly spotlights the degradation of sexual enslavement and the urge to whitewash our motives so as to not to confront or divulge our baser instincts. The ambivalence Mariya feels toward him—contempt, impatience, irritated resentment, alternating with guilt, love, and compassion—likewise shades her relations with her daughter Sasha, an actress whose self-confident youth and beauty heighten Mariya's melancholy awareness of aging without having contributed anything durable to life. Mariya's readily admitted bouts of jealousy, moodiness and vanity, her sexual susceptibility, and her refusal to conform to prefabricated models of behavior are a departure from the touted Soviet ideal of daughter, wife, and mother. She emerges, consequently, as a credible, if not always admirable, human being. Although stylistically unmemorable, Ganina's transgressive narrative constructs an important bridge between the reticence of the older generation and the uninhibited outspokenness of recent women's prose by integrating what formerly was deemed reprehensible into a basically decent personality. *Uslysh' svoi chas* humanizes instead of stigmatizing woman's sexual appetite, rationality, independence, and greed for life.²⁹

Nina Katerli, one of the few women writers of the inter-war generation to experiment with the fantastic, parallel plotlines, and male viewpoint in her prose (e.g., in the collections *Okno* [Window, 1981] and *Tsvetnye otkrytki* [Color Postcards, 1986]), not only challenges the conventional paradigm of femininity, but in *Polina* (1984) posits a subversive alternative to the exemplary family extolled for decades by the Soviet establishment (as does Tolstaya in "Ogon' i pyl'" [Fire and Dust, 1986]). Katerli contrasts the anomalous, freewheeling life of Polina, a successful senior engineer involved with an impotent poet on the social fringe, and the regularized domesticity of her friend Maiya, a responsible wife to the influential director Igor', a caring mother to their spoiled daughter Larisa, and an immaculate housekeeper. Whereas the prodigal Polina follows the unpredictable zigzags of instincts and feeling that lead her into diverse friendships and a series of amorous entanglements, Maiya's meticulously organized existence is ruled "by the iron principle of doing everything as it should be done" around the immovable Hearth of Home. Juxtaposing the centrifugal and the centripetal,³⁰ the story is structured on the seesaw effect: as Polina's approach to life, which originally seems catacombed with every possible risk, becomes increasingly attractive in that it proves capable of absorbing and dealing with every change, the ostensibly secure stability of the familial Maiya disintegrates on account of its imperviousness to the unforeseen and unforeseeable. When Maiya's jealousy upon inadvertently glimpsing her husband at an apparent tryst with another woman culminates in a nervous breakdown, the fabric of their family unit unravels with devastating speed. As in many of Katerli's stories, which examine how the shocking, irrational, and fantastic can erupt without warning and invade the most tranquil and stolid regimen, so here Katerli implies that the superimposition of social form on human relations offers no guarantees. *Polina* makes a compelling case against repressive uniformity through cultural mandate.

If fantasy distinguishes some of Katerli's stories from the enervated rhythms of her colleagues' rather nondescript style, Viktoriya Tokareva's dis-

28 A reworking, with slight changes, of "Zolotoye odinochestvo."

29 The original prototypical woman with appetite in Western culture, of course, was Eve—a figure stigmatized for illicit desires that have continued to be condemned in women. Feminist criticism has suggested different readings of the lapsarian myth and its implications for womanhood. See, for instance, Sandra W. Gilbert & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), pp. 53-59.

30 The antipodes reproduce the myriad binary oppositions in Yevgeny Zamyatin's *My (We)*, subsumed under the governing dualism of Energy (freedom, revolution, the irrational and haphazard) and Entropy (control, totalitarianism, the logical and ordered). Seeing such connections enables one to detect the politically repressive aspects of certain ostensibly personal structures.

tinctive authorial signature is humor. Irony, lightness of touch, and irrepressible hope in the midst of desolation tend to distract the reader from the unsettling frequency with which infidelity, disillusionment, mutual abuse, and partings surround Tokareva's major theme of love, from her first collection, *O tom, chego ne bylo* (About That Which Wasn't, 1969), to her sixth and last, *Letayushchiye kacheli. Nichego osobennogo* (The Flying Swing. Nothing Special, 1987). Tokareva's heroines have grown older along with their creator, but the scenarios of mutability they enact and witness have not altered substantially over the last quarter century: friendships cool, passions wither, affairs end, and marriages collapse. Change is inexorable and inevitably for the worse, and Tokareva's defensive strategy of humor masks both her own and her protagonists' vulnerability to this painful process.

Discrepancy is Tokareva's dominant perception and her chief structuring device: her characters tend to reside in limbo, shuttled back and forth between imagination and reality, hopes and results, beginnings and endings, youth and age. In one of her best stories, "Mezhdu nebom i zemley" (Between Heaven and Earth, 1985), both the title and the airplane setting metaphorically capture the suspension between the ideal and the concretely accessible that defines the human condition; tellingly, the plane lands before story's end. The chasm yawning between expectations and fulfillment is metaphorized or made explicit in numerous stories (e.g., "Letayushchiye kacheli," "Nichego osobennogo" [1981]) in which habit and weakness devour dreams. What imparts to Tokareva's prose its characteristic tone is, similarly, the incongruence between matter and manner, whereby the potentially tragic is soft-pedaled by a comically breezy formulation, while aggrandizing similes and pseudo-syllogisms elevate the incidental to significance.

Until the mid-1980s Tokareva's narrators functioned as bittersweetly rueful observers. *Glasnost'* suddenly inspired her to start injecting doses of moralizing into her increasingly longer narratives, with infelicitous results. Social issues, earlier submerged in an inconspicuous but plausible back-

ground, now obtruded. And the foregrounding of alcoholism, systemic corruption, paralyzing bureaucracy, etc., in such works as *Dlinnyy den'* (A Long Day, 1986), *Pyat' figur na postamente* (Five Figures on a Pedestal, 1987), and *Pasha i Pavlushka* (1987) did not mesh with Tokareva's sardonic style.³¹ The regrettable effects of this metamorphosis on the representation of womanhood are most evident in *Pervaya popytka*, an allegory of moral punishment visited upon a woman's body for her "unwomanly" conduct. Approximating Katerli's and Tolstaya's technique of presenting a female protagonist through the eyes of her "closest friend,"³² Tokareva filters Mara's series of monstrous acts through the reactions—awe, revulsion, embarrassed envy—of a contrasting personality. Hence Mara's manipulation, flamboyant consumerism, infidelities, and terminal selfishness cohere into a way of life that becomes a counter-example to the narrator's quiet, sometimes dull, modest but steady family existence. This recuperation of the traditional domestic paradigm lacks, however, the complexity of Katerli's *Polina*, for Tokareva paints Mara in such unrelievedly dark colors that she verges on caricature. A woman who destroys marriages and careers, wantonly despoils nature, and dehumanizes everyone around her as merely a means to her own ends so patently violates the whole range of unwritten laws overseeing decency that she can hardly present a legitimate alternative to *any* model. By default, then, the narrator's way of life in this specious, overdetermined "either/or" acquires a positive aura, particularly since she addresses precisely those moral problems that never trouble Mara.

The most profoundly disquieting aspect of *Pervaya popytka* is Tokareva's apparent conviction that Mara's "punishment" ultimately fits her "crimes": justice is presumably served when a woman who uses her sexuality "illegitimately" for self-empowerment is stricken with a breast cancer that necessitates a radical mastectomy and eventually destroys her sinful body. A moralized concept of disease, which interprets fatal illness as divine retribution, carries disturbing implications. As Susan Sontag has remarked, cancer, as the most radical of disease

31 For an overview of Tokareva's work, emphasizing its latest phase, see Richard Chapple, "Happy Never After: The Work of Viktoriia Tokareva and Glasnost," *Fruits of her Plume*.

32 Katerli, with her penchant for multiple points of view, makes rich use of both Polina's and Maiya's perspectives as mutual correctives and sources of self-revelation. Tolstaya's method invariably filters the more likable or enigmatic character, who remains distanced and ambiguous, through the consciousness of the more crass vulgar foil (in "Ogon' i pyl'" the reader's perception of Svetlana/Pipka is constantly mediated through Rimma's jealous disapprobation). Whereas both Katerli and Tokareva flesh out their narrating personae sufficiently to convey their subjectivity and thus to dissociate them from any authorial judgment, Tokareva's failure to do so makes her narrator virtually her mouthpiece.

metaphors, is particularly tendentious and therefore appealing to paranoid, fatalistic, and totalitarian minds.³³ If sexualized in its gender-specific manifestation, breast cancer as metaphor joins that legion of misogynistic moves calculated to reduce women's flesh to trope or collapsed identity—a primitive summation that precludes authentic physical being. One need only compare *Pervaya popytka* to Varlamova's *Mnimaya zhizn'* to realize what a harsh disservice Tokareva's conclusion performs to fictional representations of womanhood.³⁴

A Lone Voice in the Wilderness

Of the female authors born between the two world wars, Lyudmila Petrushevskaya stands supreme by virtue of her stylistic sophistication and her formidable originality as prosaist and playwright. Her unorthodox narrative and dramatic tactics, combined with the unrelieved somberness of her vision, doubtless account for the insuperable obstacles that blocked her route to regular publication for almost twenty years. For Petrushevskaya's controversial talent overturns the one-dimensional expectations of women's writing on several fronts via her grim pessimism (optimism is women's duty); her violation of decorum through physiological detail (only men may advert explicitly and crudely to the body and its functions); her broaching of such taboo topics as nymphomania and incest (interdicted for men and women alike); and the gnarled, aggressive poetry of her synthetic yet unique language (Logos/linguistic imperialism is a male prerogative).

Petrushevskaya's compressed short stories, of which only one collection (*Bessmertnaya lyubov'* [Immortal Love, 1989]) has appeared to date,³⁵ portray a nightmarish world on the psychological edge of existence. Suffused with morbid humor and grotesquerie, her harshly unidealizing narratives record the underbelly of human relations—the nasty traffic in desires and fears where everything carries

a literal and metaphorical price. Condemned to life, the inhabitants of her desolate universe invariably find themselves cut adrift from reliable moorings; are ruled by appetite and self-interest; fall into seemingly irreversible patterns of (self-)destructive behavior; abrogate moral responsibility; inflict and suffer pain in an unbroken chain of universal abuse. Suicide, alcoholism, prostitution, one-night stands, fictitious marriages, unwanted pregnancies and abortions, neglected children, crushing poverty, theft, physical and psychological violence constitute the "norm" of Petrushevskaya's fiction.

Like her plays,³⁶ Petrushevskaya's overtly gynocentric stories concentrate on the middle class, chiefly the urban technical intelligentsia. Most of her protagonists lead lives irremediably maimed through personal weakness, uncontrollable circumstances, male mistreatment, and relatives' interference or overbearing demands: all too often Petrushevskaya's women must tend simultaneously to dependent children and needy, typically hospitalized, mothers. Alienation, irretrievable loss, dereliction, and demeaning hardships comprise the lot of these beasts of burden (and unreliability) mainly because in Petrushevskaya's instrumentalized world, cold-blooded selfishness governs the relations between family members, spouses, lovers, and friends (e.g., in "Manyia" [1973], "Seti i lovushki" [Nets and Traps, 1974], "Smotrovaya ploshchadka" [The Overlook, 1982], "Temnaya sud'ba" [A Gloomy Fate, 1988], "Strana" [Country, 1988], "Takaya devochka" [That Kind of Girl, 1988]). Women traffic in sexual favors, get impregnated by men they barely know, miscarry, have abortions, and foist their children onto others or bring them up only to utilize them as objects of vented frustrations, unreasonable pressures, or sexual aberration. Maternity in Petrushevskaya, as in Grekova, is the most telling moral test, but one her heroines appear doomed to fail. Men, in turn, drink, engage in multiple infidelities, and express themselves most eloquently with their fists. Romantic

33 Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (NY: Vintage, 1977/1979), pp. 79–82. Although Sontag's study of punitive fantasies flourishing around disease, especially tuberculosis and cancer, may first strike the reader as extreme, the evidence she marshals to expose the political nature of its tropological abuse is persuasive. See also her recent study, *Aids and its Metaphors* (NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988/9).

34 Tokareva's latest story opts for a different reductionism in its equally unsatisfactory conclusion: "But right then I pressed my girl to me as if I were holding my regained life in my arms. And that's the way it is, for LIFE and WOMAN are one and the same thing." Viktoriya Tokareva, "Kak ya ob'yavlyal voynu Yaponii" (How I Declared War on Japan), *Krokodil* 12 (April 1991): 9.

35 Petrushevskaya's only other prose collection is her volume of tales, purportedly for children, *Lechenie Vasiliya* (Vasily's Treatment, 1991).

36 Petrushevskaya's other book-length publications include three collections of drama: *P'esy* (Plays, 1983), *Pesni XX veka* (Songs of the Twentieth Century, 1988), and *Tri devushki v golubom* (Three Girls in Blue, 1989). For a good introduction to Petrushevskaya's works, see Nancy Condee, "Lyudmila Petrushevskaya: How the 'Lost People' Live," *Institute of Current World Affairs Newsletter*, no. 14 (1 February 1986), and Josephine Woll, "The Minotaur in the Maze: Remarks on Lyudmila Petrushevskaya," *World Literature Today* (issue on recent Russian literature)—forthcoming.

love, the staple of much women's fiction, is a luxury to which Petrushevskaya's characters rarely aspire as they battle for temporary shelter ("Skripka" [The Violin, 1989]), clothes, food, sex ("Doch' Kseni" [Ksenya's Daughter]), and alcohol ("Ali-Baba" [1988]). Ethical considerations fall by the wayside in this Darwinian struggle, painted in flaunted physiological hues. Since the violation of the psyche, which is Petrushevskaya's ruling obsession, carries the taboo of ultimate sin, it cannot be represented directly, and therefore gets displaced onto the body.³⁷

Devoid of nature, sparse in dialogue and psychological analysis, and stripped of imagery, Petrushevskaya's prose relies for its effects on the distinctive language of its ambiguous narrators. That language, like the lives it records, is a triumph of incongruities, synthesizing urban slang, professional jargon, cultural clichés, malapropisms, racy colloquialism, and solecisms. These cascade in a relentless monologic stream that seems random, but in fact strives to camouflage or to defer confrontation with what is most crucial and, usually, most painful (Petrushevskaya obviously has learned a great deal from Dostoevskiy and Freud). Revelation, not action, is the pivot on which her narratives turn, yet the (manipulative) impulse to withhold constantly puts brakes on the desire to divulge. That is why omission, hints, and unclarified allusions define Petrushevskaya's narrative mode. The seamy catastrophes of abandonments, beatings, scandals, and hysterical suicide attempts in which Petrushevskaya's plots abound are conveyed in a monstrously calm narrative voice whose digressive, casual chatter is a stratagem of deflection, transference, and avoidance. The most chilling aspect of the narration is precisely the discrepancy between the horrors that implacably multiply and the flat, offhand tone of reportage that diminishes everything to the same level of banality. Although Petrushevskaya divides her prose into stories (*istorii*) and monologues (*monologi*), they differ stylistically only in the use of free indirect discourse versus first-person narration, respectively.

"Svoy krug" (Our Crowd, written 1979, published 1990) and "Vremya noch'" (Night Time, 1992), Petrushevskaya's two longest and best narratives, offer vivid, multifaceted illustrations of how the moral underpinnings of contemporary Russian society have eroded. Her recent stories, "Novye Robinzony" (The New Family Robinson, 1989) and "Gigiena" (Hygiene, 1990), belong to the flood of Apocalyptic visions inundating current Soviet fiction, and with one of her latest publications ("Skazki dlya vzroslykh" [Fairy Tales for Adults, 1990]), Petrushevskaya has made a transition to a new genre: that of gnostic allegory and Kafkaesque parable. In these, as in all her prose, Petrushevskaya's trenchant *sui generis* style sets her apart from writers of both the older and her own generation. It allies her with such practitioners of fiction as Tat'yana Tolstaya and Valeriya Narbikova, whose principal inspiration comes from language and their desire to exploit its potential. If the extended postponement of Petrushevskaya's full-fledged entrance into the literary community has synchronized readers' discovery of her oeuvre with the emergence of much younger writers, that belatedness, ironically, locates Petrushevskaya where she, in a sense, belongs—alongside authors with whom she enjoys the authentic kinship lacking with her contemporaries.³⁸

Language Rules

Women's prose of the 1980s evidences a perceptible shift, whereby a fascination with language has displaced the primarily thematic preoccupations of earlier decades. The fiction of Yelena Makarova, Larisa Vaneyeva, and Nina Sadur, for example, heightens the reader's awareness of language as mediator through the elliptical, fragmented ordering of their story materials, and in Sadur's case through the creation of an individualized folklore. With the "realistic surface" ruffled by such underlying forces as linguistic deformation, esthetic logic, and the "two-dimensionality" of folklore conventions, the interplay between "what" and "how" gains complexity and redistributes emphases.

37 For a discussion of Petrushevskaya's euphemistic displacement and the stylistic consequences of that transferral, see Helena Goscilo, "Body Talk in Current Fiction: Speaking Parts and (W)holes," *Stanford Slavic Studies* (1992)—forthcoming.

38 This does not mean to suggest that younger writers without exception are blessed with or cultivate an original style. In the fiction of Nadezhda Kozhevnikova and Tat'yana Nabatnikova, for example, thematics not only far outweigh esthetic interest, but also reveal both writers' proximity to Velembovskaya, Shcherbakova, and Uvarova. For a list of Kozhevnikova's collections, see *Balancing Acts*, p. 328; see Tat'yana Nabatnikova, *Rasskazy* (Stories, 1982), *Domashneye vospitaniye* (Home Upbringing, 1984), *Na zolotom kryl'tse sideli* (Sitting on the Golden Porch, 1987), *Zagaday zhelaniye* (Pick a Wish, 1990), and *Dar Izory* (Izora's Gift, 1991).

What occurs is, in Ortega y Gasset's memorable phrase, "the dehumanization of art," with metaphor as its most radical instrument of dehumanization.³⁹ The process, if not actually invalidating the seminal nineteenth-century trope of literature as the mirror of life, at the very least depotentiates it by distorting the mirror's reflective properties almost beyond recognition. This "estrangement" and self-assertion of style showcase language most rewardingly in Tat'yana Tolstaya's and most ostentatiously in Valeriya Narbikova's prose.

Tolstaya's poetic renditions of a highly subjectivized universe ruled by language, imagination, and time, come as a shock to readers of the journalism-infused prose of the 1970s and 1980s. With the aid of myth, folklore, and a plethora of intertexts, her maximally condensed narratives offer meditations on eternal universal concerns: the elusive significance of a given life (in "Sonya" [1984] and "Samaya lyubimaya" [Most Beloved, 1986]); the isolation of the individual personality ("Peters" [1986], "Spisokoyno, synok" [Sweet Dreams, Son, 1986]); the conflicting claims of spirit and matter ("Okhota na mamonta" [Hunting the Woolly Mammoth, 1985]); the subtle symbiosis of perception and language ("Fakir" [1986], "Noch'" [Night, 1987]); and the transforming power of imagination and memory ("Na zolotom kryl'tse sideli..." [On the Golden Porch...] [1983], "Reka Okkervil'" [Okkervill River, 1985]). Yet, throughout her oeuvre, as Tolstaya herself readily acknowledges, style has primacy over thematic novelty and psychological insight, for the mainspring of Tolstaya's creativity is a love of the language into which, she declares, we are all born, and whose riches she mines through an epic array of devices.⁴⁰

Combining minimal plots and scant dialogue with extravagant poetic description, Tolstaya's narratives surge at an irregular pace as they slip unobtrusively in and out of temporal frames and characters' thoughts through quasi-direct discourse. Critics with a characterological ax to grind have made much of Tolstaya's characters (often

situated at the two extremes of the age spectrum), largely because Tolstaya's vividly grotesque depiction of their simultaneously risible and pitiable features renders them memorable: for example, the aged protagonists of "Milaya Shura" (Dear Shura, 1985) and "Samaya lyubimaya," the little girl in "Lyubish'—ne lyubish'" (Loves Me, Loves Me Not, 1987). A comparably synthetic technique for portraying hapless "losers" embroiled in amorous endeavors allows Tolstaya to demythologize romance (in "Peters" and "Vyshel mesyats iz tumana" [The Moon Came Out, 1987]), just as shifting, even contradictory, impressions of a given individual destabilize a single, unilinear interpretation of character. Tolstaya's fiction teems with dreamers, eccentrics, self-abnegators, failures, pragmatists, and misanthropes tossed between unrealizable desires and brute reality. That gap they bridge by the transfiguring capacities of the imagination, which flourishes unchecked in childhood, but dwindles with time's passage. Hence the melancholy sense of loss and helplessness that imbues Tolstaya's texts.

In compensation for her protagonists' deprivations, Tolstaya conjures up for the reader an Aladdin's cave of stylistic treasures. Scrambling temporal and spatial categories, alternating poetic flights with satiric irony, veering from one narrative perspective to another, leaping from colloquialisms and popular slogans to elevated diction and citations from "authoritative" sources, Tolstaya packs her kaleidoscopic narratives to the brim. Readers' attention is enticed away from the (as a rule remarkably simple) plotline by the bold originality of her metaphors, which sometimes swell to Homeric proportions; by her breathtakingly unconventional, subversive juxtapositions; by her idiosyncratic, garrulous Sternian narrator, who splinters into several voices; and by the dense palpability of a mood or atmosphere built through an accumulation of rhetorical devices. Tolstaya's iridescent, sumptuous prose—laden with colorful tropes, apostrophes, exclamations, and allusions—isolates her stylistically from the majority of contemporary Russian authors

39 Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings on Art and Culture* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), p. 32. Soviet assessments of Tolstaya's prose (as "cold," "inorganic," and "aristocratic") have corroborated Ortega y Gasset's thesis that esthetic enjoyment is counter to the demotic requirement of readily recognizable human qualities in contemplated objects.

40 For Tolstaya's views on language, see the interview with Peter Barta, "The Author, the Cultural Tradition and Glasnost: An Interview with Tatyana Tolstaya," *RLJ* vol. 44, nos. 147-149 (1990): 266-68. For more detailed discussion of her prose, see Helena Goscilo, "Tat'yana Tolstaia's 'Dome of Many-Coloured Glass': The World Refracted through Multiple Perspective," *Slavic Review* 47, no. 2 (Summer 1988): 280-90; "Tolstajan Love as Surface Text," *SEEJ* 34, no. 1 (1990): 40-52; "Paradise, Purgatory, and Post-Mortems in the World of Tat'yana Tolstaja," *Indiana Slavic Studies* 5 (1990): 97-113; "Tolstaian Times: Traversals and Transfers," *New Directions in Soviet Literature*, ed. S. Graham (Macmillan, 1992), pp. 36-62; "Perspective in T. Tolstaia's Wonderland of Art," *World Literature Today* (issue on recent Russian literature). See also Adele Barker, "Are Women Writing Women's Writing in the Soviet Union Today? Tolstaya and Grekova," *Studies in Comparative Communism* vol. 21, nos. 3/4 (Autumn/Winter 1988): 357-64.

and consociates her with stylistic innovators of the 1920s (Yuriy Olesha, Isaak Babel'), Andrey Bely, and Vladimir Nabokov.

Tolstaya's outspoken opposition to Western feminism has prompted readers to comb her fiction for gender biases and to locate them in her depiction of women, who typically appear as temptresses (Faina, Valya, and the peri in "Peters," Tamila in "Svidanie s ptitsey" [Rendezvous with a Bird, 1983]), oversized, bossy termagants (Veronika in "'Na zolotom kryl'tse sideli...,'" Peters' grandmother and wife in "Peters"), gargoylish hulks of decrepitude (Shura in "Milaya Shura"), or empty-headed husband-hunters (Zoya in "Okhota na mamonta"). Such a selective focus, however, ignores the equally bizarre images of masculinity in the same texts (Uncle Pasha, Peters, Simeonov, Filin). To varying degrees Tolstaya subjects all of her personae to a modernist dehumanization through metaphor. If any of Tolstaya's texts lend themselves to a reading consonant with feminist principles, their status as anti-essentialist statements derives not from Tolstaya's sympathy for the women's cause, but from her ironic debunking of clichés as cultural debris. Language, not politics, fuels her inspiration. In fact, "Okhota na mamonta," "Poet i muza" (The Poet and the Muse, 1986), and "Ogon' i pyl'" dethrone specifically gender stereotypes through ironic double-voicing, literalization of metaphor, and parodic interpolation of myth.⁴¹ Paradoxically, then, Tolstaya—the anti-feminist of countless interviews and conferences—in her fiction dismantles through parody precisely the kind of gendered formulae regarding physical attributes, idealized womanhood, and domestic structures that feminists battle. For, perhaps more than any writer since Nabokov, Tolstaya grasps what Bruno Schulz called "the terror and predatoriness of the platitude." Tolstaya's postmodernist authorial practices—decentering, irony and paradox, interrogation of institutionalized separations, simultaneous installation and subversion of prevailing norms⁴²—and her self-assured seizure of language not only annex those prerogatives that

traditional binarism has automatically assigned to malekind, but unmakes the absolutist presuppositions that enable ideologies to "harden into objects and so sustain themselves as real presences in the world."⁴³

Whereas Tolstaya reigns as the tsarina of tropes, Valeriya Narbikova, with the publication of her first novella, *Ravnovesiye sveta dnevnykh i nochnykh zvyozd* (Equilibrium of Light of Diurnal and Nocturnal Stars, 1988) earned the dubious sobriquet of the first female writer of erotica in the Soviet Union.⁴⁴ Subsequent works, paronomastically entitled *Okolo ekolo* (Around Ecolo..., 1990), *Probeg—pro beg* (Running through the Run, 1990), *Ad kak Da/aD kak dA* (Hell as Yes/helL as yeS, 1990) have confirmed some critics in their view of Narbikova as a proponent of sexual liberation. Certainly, Narbikova's avowed appreciation of the libidinal as a healthy respite from the unremitting stress of modern existence—an appreciation demonstrably shared by her heroines—, plus the recurrence of love triangles and references to "private" bodily parts, underwear, and copulation in her texts seem to offer sufficient grounds for such a perception. Yet, despite her express wish to rehabilitate the body as a means of expressive communication,⁴⁵ what reigns supreme in her works is, in fact, language: in *Ravnovesiye* Sana becomes impregnated by an exchange not of fluids, but of words over the telephone; Pushkin's physical presence is conjured up by mere mention of the word "grasshopper" (*sverchok*)—his friends' nickname for him; literalization of metaphor causes materialization of entities. Narbikova's ludic antics with reverse syllogisms, her paronomastic exercises and irreverent recontextualization of phrases all privilege words at the expense of character, setting, and plot. In *Probeg—pro beg*, the entire episode of Gleb's visit to a dentist (*dantist*) hinges on the latter's homonymic coincidence with the name of Pushkin's killer, d'Anthès. Cultural resonances, evoked by mention of Aristotle, Boileau, Avvakum, Pushkin, and Lermontov, are either completely repressed (Avvakum) or confined to a single instance of a deflationary device

41 In this connection, see Helena Goscilo, "Monsters Monomaniacal, Marital, and Medical: Tat'iana Tolstaia's Regenerative Use of Gender Stereotypes," *Sexuality and the Body in Russian Culture*, eds. J. Costlow, S. Sandler, & J. Vowles (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993)—forthcoming.

42 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (NY & London: Routledge, 1988), Preface and chapter 1.

43 Beer, p. 64.

44 For an astute analysis of Narbikova's authorial strategies, see Nadya Peterson, "Games Women Play: The 'Erotic' Prose of Valeriia Narbikova," *Fruits of her Plume*.

45 The concept pioneered by K. Wimsatt of the Intentional Fallacy remains unknown in the former Soviet Union. Russians not only equate authorial intention with textual realization, but credit the authority of a single "correct reading" that (at least in the eyes of those I have interviewed) must coincide with authorial intention.

(e.g., Aristotle's unities for tragedy are applied to sex), and ultimately take a back seat to the verbal games that dominate Narbikova's literary manner.

Narbikova's works all deal with entrapment through cultural baggage, whether in the form of comprehensive cliché, ironclad hierarchies, paradigmatic situations, or words vitiated through overuse. The invariant motifs of her novellas—a love triangle, a journey (usually to the sea), a confrontation with nature, and a circular return—yield a chronotope in which time loses specificity while space receives extravagant elaboration. The extensive spatial movement reflects the genre of a utopian voyage, a search for authenticity. Narbikova essentially yearns to restore the world to a prelapsarian state, where the heuristic capacities of body and language are still intact and attuned to the Word and its Maker. To break out of the prison of inertness and rote repetition that immure bodies and words, Narbikova jettisons physical and verbal trappings (hence the shedding of clothes and traditional grammatical markers) by original reconfigurations of existent components that introduce the illicit into the conventional. Thus formerly taboo words like "blevat'" (to throw up) and "sisat'" (to pee) consort with a poetic lexicon, just as dirty underclothes witness the "sublime" conjoining of two lovers; a third party (Otmatfeyan: redolent of the Biblical Matthew ["high" text] and of sperm ["low" body]) invades a marriage, and the ménage à trois of Sana-Avvakum-Otmatfeyan becomes reconfigured by the substitution of the lover's linguistically illegitimate friend Chyashchyazhyshyn (illegitimate insofar as his name violates Russian spelling rules). This conflation of sexual and textual in *Ravnovesiye*, which creates the illusion of eroticism, reappears in *Probeg*—*pro beg*, where the triangle of Petya-Boris-Gleb (historical and literary princes) undergoes variations in a potentially endless rearrangement of other sexual/textual threesomes: Petya-Gleb-Lzhedmitriy (separated on the paronomastic plane into Lzhe-demi-triy), Petya-Tat'yana-Lzhedmitriy, Tat'yana-Onegin-Lzhedmitriy, Christ-Virgin Mary-Mary Magdalene, Natalie Goncharova-Pushkin-d'Anthès, Goncharova-Pushkin-Nikolay I, and so forth. In sum, when Narbikova's lovers have intercourse, the author's primary concern is with linguistic copulation.

A Paradigm Shift

One could validly argue that Narbikova's themes overlap with those traditional women's pre-occupations that form the cornerstone of Grekova's and Baranskaya's oeuvre: nature (in its modern, politicized variant of ecology), love, birthing, and personal fulfillment. Yet, in the case of Narbikova, Tolstaya, Petrushevskaya, Nina Sadur, and many born in the post-Stalinist era, sophisticated techniques of mediation and a fascination with the powers and limitations of language not only alter the entire framework of (re)presentation, but yield texts of such density that the reader cannot immediately detect those thematic links with the earlier generation. To equate modernist with revolutionary, and realist with reactionary, is to collude in a progressive notion of literary tradition cast in naive melioristic phrasing. Although the specific politico-cultural conditions that prevailed for decades in the Soviet Union (where modernist automatically signaled anti-establishment) invite such a collusion, intellectual integrity encourages one to resist the temptation. Nonetheless, the readiness to experiment—to entertain multiple perspectives on phenomena without resolving them in a sunny vein, to revel in uncertainty and the power of uncompromised self-expression, to diversify female subjectivity, inflecting it with irony, existentialist gloom, or playfulness—opens up new creative possibilities that recent women's prose has explored with exciting results. Without having necessarily abandoned its perennial themes of love, betrayal, revenge, and motherhood, women's fiction has transformed and recontextualized them not only through stylistic innovation but also through a more complex and fluid conception of gender. Predictability no longer characterizes women's writing, which now is the site of subversion, parody, metaphysical rumination, myth, and transgression. Nina Sadur, for instance, has elaborated a wholly original folklore (full of spells, incantations, riddles, potions, and ominous spirits) that infuses with incandescent magic all-too-familiar situations whose banality would otherwise be unendurable. Her inspired technique of defamiliarization transforms hackneyed romantic dilemmas into spellbinding mysteries that capture the clash of uncontrollable cosmic forces, conveyed with the freighted simplicity of fairy tale. In "Travy iz Odessy" (Herbs from Odessa), Yelena Makarova similarly synthesizes folklore elements with the jagged, modernist narrative that Larisa Vaneyeva also favors in her stories,

typically peppered with Old Church Slavonicisms, cryptic references, and borrowings from myth (e.g., "Venetsyanskiye zerkala" [Venetian Mirrors]). Svetlana Vasilenko in her "Duratskiye rasskazy" (Ridiculous Stories) has revived the "zaum" (trans-sense) linguistic play of the Futurists, whose antic obsessions with sound, variation, and repetition call into question narrative and logical progression as well as the mimetic imperative. In short, readers now experience not the sleepy blink of recognition, but "the shock of the new" and "the pleasure of the text."

The obsolete, denigrating rubric of "ladies' literature" (damskaya literatura), then, is irrelevant to the texts of contemporary women writers, who, apart from their ambiguous relationship to (and bold manipulation of) language, uninhibitedly exploit physiology, demystify the body,⁴⁶ and evince maximal skepticism of all authorities. Rather than allying itself with "ladies'" genres, contemporary Russian women's prose sooner manifests tendencies shared by representatives of modernism and poststructuralist Western feminism—for example, Gertrude Stein, Fay Weldon, and Margaret Atwood.

Western feminists have queried the extent to which the postmodernist enterprise overlaps with feminist imperatives.⁴⁷ Through their shared deconstructive stance, both feminism and postmodernism challenge the Western rationalist tradition of objective Truths on the grounds, essentially, of bad faith, whereby political agendas of specific-interest groups have masqueraded as universals. Rejecting totalizing Truths, both postulate such humanistic disciplines as philosophy, history, and literary criticism as sites of competing ideologies, armed with a rhetoric that promotes individual or group biases to the status of unassailable axioms. Both "celebrate liminality, the disruption of boundaries, the confounding of traditional markers of 'difference,'" and the decentered subject.⁴⁸ Skeptical of "eternal verities" and fixities, both opt for the provisional and contextually determined over the transcendent generalized. Hence the irony,

self-reflexiveness, and tendency to contest values while inscribing them, common to both.

To characterize recent Russian women's fiction as postmodernist is to engage in fanciful hyperbole. Yet its receptivity to postmodernist trends holds promise, inasmuch as the single greatest benefit of feminist and postmodernist decanonization for Russian women's writing is its potential anti-essentialism. The falsification that results from rigidly gendering human qualities has not served Soviet literature well. Among other disservices, it has foisted on women writers a model of female talent at dramatic odds with their individual authorial inclinations. Through a systematic inculcation of sex differences within its society, it has also set too narrowly the compass of possible representations of womanhood in their fiction, and has stifled stylistic independence. Postmodernism therefore may offer an auspicious route to liberating innovations in these areas. It makes sense, therefore, that the female authors who have ruffled conservative feathers are precisely those whose texts embrace physicality, debunk sacred myths, proceed by irony, and are implicated in a highly self-conscious use of language: Petrushevskaya, Tolstaya, Narbikova, Sadur, Vaneyeva, Vasilenko, Paley, and Tarasova. If female fiction during the 1960s and 1970s left readers' imagination unstirred, Petrushevskaya's belated recognition and the debuts of Tolstaya, Narbikova, Sadur, and Paley during the 1980s have launched us into what à la Pavel Anenkov I would call "the extraordinary decade" of women's writing.

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46 See, for instance, Yelena Tarasova's trans-gendered appropriation of Christ's Passion in her unsettling story "Ne pomnyashchaya zla" (The Woman Who Doesn't Remember Evil) and Marina Paley's satirical deconstruction in "Svidanie" (Rendezvous) of the cultural (i.e., male) conventions overseeing the creation of the feminine physical Ideal. On this trend in current women's writing, see Helena Goscilo, "Inscribing the Female Body in Women's Fiction: Cross-Gendered Passion à la Holbein," paper presented at the Conference on Gender Restructuring, Helsinki, August 1992.

47 See Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford/NY: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1987), and the volume of essays edited by Linda J. Nicholson, *Feminism/Postmodernism* (NY & London: Routledge, 1990).

48 Patricia Waugh, *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (NY & London: Routledge, 1988/89), p. 4.

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